

MINIMALISM: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

PART I

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Perhaps the most compelling debate among biblical scholars today involves the view of "history" as found in biblical texts. There are few scholars today who believe without qualification that the Bible is totally reliable as a historical document, especially in light of the Bible's own internal witness to its purposes. In particular, an oft repeated statement in I and II Kings should be taken at face value. Numerous times, from Solomon onward, after the notice of a king's death, the biblical text offers the following disclaimer: *Now the rest of the activities of _____, are they not written in the Book of the _____?* The only change in this formula is the name of the king and the exact name of the book. In I Kings 11:41, Solomon has a special reference work titled "The Book [*sepher*] of the Acts of Solomon." For additional information about Jeroboam and every other king of *Israel*, readers are referred to the "Book [*sepher*] of the Chronicles [*divrei hayamim*] of the Kings of *Israel*" (I Kg. 14:19. et al.).¹ For Rehoboam and every other king of *Judah*, such information is in the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of *Judah*" (14:29. et al.).^{2/3}

This formula is nothing more than a frank statement by the biblical authors that they did not intend to write "history" as we might define the word in the modern world. They knew that they had not included many facts that historians might ask about, and so they tell us where to look for "just the facts." The prophetic editors of Kings were offering a moral evaluation of each king, not a chronicle or annal of his life and career.

Now it is one thing to note that the biblical record is incomplete, that "facts" not germane to the prophetic vision of a king's obedience to God were left out because the biblical editors chose not to include them. It is quite another thing to presume that the information they did include in the biblical record is fundamentally flawed, or worse, a pious fraud.

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What must be characterized as a new development in the discussion among scholars about the historical narratives in the Bible is the position that has come to be known as "minimalism," whose adherents have adopted the position that the only legitimate attitude is 100 percent skepticism about the historical reliability of every passage in the Bible. That is, only when independent confirmation of a biblical position can be found may the biblical record be trusted. For such scholars, confirmation must come in the form of physical artifacts archaeologically recovered and scientifically datable.

Basic to the minimalist cause is the assumption that the texts of the Bible were not composed to recount the history of the Israelites, but to serve a naked political ambition. The biblical authors, working quite late in the Persian or even the Hellenistic era, were people living in Babylonia/Persia who wanted to gain political control over the former territory of Judah/Jerusalem. To support their position, they needed to demonstrate to the ruling authorities that they were the successors of a people who boasted an ancient presence in and suffered an unjust exile from Judah. This political exigency, rather than any historical reality, forms the foundation of a literary saga to be presented to Persian authorities. Its aim was not to recount the past, but to justify a claim to leadership, otherwise without grounds, in the conquered province of Judea (including Jerusalem). Only such a story would give them the exclusive right to the land.

My own assessment of minimalism is that it fails to demonstrate its claims. First, I do not believe that total skepticism is either possible or appropriate in any endeavor. Researchers must believe something in order to begin their work. Their belief may be in a text like the Bible, or it may be in the validity of a particular method of interpreting that text. At the other extreme, their beliefs may be so blind as to obscure any evidence that appears to argue against the position which they wish to prove, or they may be malleable enough to allow for on-course corrections as new evidence is uncovered. But the idea that position "A" is completely subjective and therefore wrong, while position "B" is completely objective and therefore right, is misleading at the outset. Archaeology and archaeologists have as many different camps and mindsets as do biblical theologians. And this must be recognized.

Second, I know of no evidence that anyone in the Persian government ever read the Bible, much less relied on it in deciding to which political group

they would grant leadership in the province of Judea. But the idea that the Bible is largely a narrative created out of whole cloth simply to impress Persian authorities fails on another front. The biblical narratives are ill-suited to such a purpose! Why would Persian authorities be impressed with the land claims of people whose own story of their origins traced their ancestry back not to Canaan or Judea, but to Mesopotamia and Egypt? The Abraham of the Bible, for example, was born in Mesopotamia, and migrated to Canaan as a mature adult. He stayed only a short while in Canaan before wandering down into Egypt for another brief sojourn. And then he returned to Canaan. His grandson later moved back to Egypt where his descendants stayed for four centuries before returning to initiate the conquest of Canaan. How could such a story possibly buttress claims to ownership of Canaan? Surely people creating a story about the legitimacy of their claim to a land could have concocted something more persuasive. At the least, they would have needed to create a story that would assure the authorities of how their folks had always been in the place to which they were petitioning to return.

Third, a narrative designed for the political purpose of legitimating a claim to land would surely not have spent so much time emphasizing the fact that the people seeking to return to their earlier status of leadership were descendants of the very group that had repeatedly failed in their ethical and moral obligations to the Deity whom alone they were supposed to serve. The biblical story as we now possess it makes two equally clear assertions. On the one hand, the possession of Canaan by the Israelites had been the result of a Divine promise. But on the other hand, the loss of that possession had been the result of Divine punishment. Thus the ethical preaching of the prophets and Deuteronomy would make it harder for people to justify their claim to possess the land by holding out an impossibly high standard of conduct that would have to be met before the land could be given to them once more.

Fourth, the minimalist position fails to offer a reasonable hypothesis to explain why a Persian or a Hellenistic Jew would include traditional material from the former Northern Kingdom of Samaria, some of whose own survivors were competing with the Judahites for leadership! And not only did the biblical editors include this Northern material, either they transmitted it faithfully or in certain cases they took the trouble to imitate a dialect of Israelite Hebrew that is clearly different from the Judahite dialect found in most bibli-

cal books.⁴ In this regard, attention must be given to the linguistic evidence of differences between pre- and post-exilic Hebrew,⁵ a fact left unexplained by the minimalist theory of the construction of the Bible in a late Persian or Hellenistic time frame. Who among the Judahites would have sponsored the survival of Northern traditions? For whom would they have been theologically significant? And how could such materials have advanced the argument that Judahites were entitled to receive the official backing of the Persian government to obtain title to Canaan? By contrast, the biblical record indicates a royal political interest in the time of Josiah to accept some refugees from the former northern Kingdom of Israel into the Kingdom of Judah. And it is reasonable to suppose that if survivors of the former Northern Kingdom were accepted into Judah, then there would be ample reason to include Northern traditions that meshed with the ethical and moral demands of the Judahites. If there were no ex-Northerners around, there would be no reason to retain and re-interpret their old traditions, no reason to re-introduce their great ethical heroes like Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah ben Imlah, and others.

Finally, since writing was more preservative than creative,⁶ we must wonder why exiled Judahites would attempt to create afresh a text that had no history of traditional acceptance. Stuart A. Irvine sums up the problem concisely: "Historical propaganda may omit facts or twist them for the maximum 'spin' effect, but if it is to prove effective, it cannot flatly contradict what an audience otherwise knows to be true."⁷

Faced with only two options, one which accepts the historicity of the Bible uncritically and the other which denies to the Bible any authenticity not verified by a particular kind of scientific source, I believe we must rule both options to be equally dangerous extremes. But most scholars fall somewhere in a more moderate camp, claiming neither more historicity for the Bible than the biblical text does for itself, yet not presuming historical fraud for all facts unproven by scientific method.

NOTES

1. See also I Kings 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; II Kings 10:34; 13:8; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31.
2. See also I Kings 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; II Kings 8:23; 12:19; 14:18; 15:6, 15:36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17; 21:25; 23:28; 24:5. This formula is missing only for Jehohaz, who died in Egypt, and for

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Jehoiachin. II Kings 23:24 notes that Jehoahaz died in exile in Egypt. II Kings 24:29-30 refers to the fact that it is not noted that Jehoiachin died in exile in Babylon. Zedekiah died in captivity (II Kgs. 25; see also Jer. 34:2-5).

3. The Chronicler uses the same basic formula, but cites works not mentioned in Kings. For example, I Chronicles 29.29 underscores the special status of David with reference to *the words of Samuel the Seer* [ro'eh], *the words of Nathan the prophet* [navi], and *the words of Gad the visionary*." Solomon can be referenced under *the words of Nathan the prophet, the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and the visions of Iddo the visionary concerning Jeroboam the son of Nebat* (II Chron. 9.29). A final twist in Chronicles 16.11 describes the information about Asa as located in the *Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel*. In short, the Chronicler can not only refer to other works of literature, but can classify them from among several distinct literary designations: a "book" [sepher], a "prophecy" [nevu'ah], a "vision," prophetic "words" [devarim], or a even a *midrash* (13.22; 24.27).

4. Perhaps the most important work done on this issue is by Gary A. Rendsburg, "Late Biblical Hebrew and the Date of 'P,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1980) pp. 65-80; and "The Date of the Exodus and the Conquest/Settlement: The Case for the 1100s," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992) pp. 510-527; and "The Early History of Israel," in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*, ed. G. D. Young, M. W. Chavalas, and R. E. Averbec (Bethesda, Md: CDL Press) 1997.

5. A. Hurvitz, "The Historical Quest for 'Ancient Israel' and the Linguistic Evidence of the Hebrew Bible: Some Methodological Observations," *Vetus Testamentum* 47 (1997) pp. 301-315.

6. Charles David Isbell, *God's Scribes: How the Bible Became the Bible* (Shangri-La Publications, 1999) pp. 1-3.

7. "The Rise of the House of Jehu," in *The Land That I Will Show You*, ed. J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham (Sheffield: JSOT Supplement Series 343) p. 116.

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